

Reforming Agribusiness Corporations

A Vision of Ecological Agrarianism in America

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Abstract

Agribusiness corporations, as both a cause and a result of industrial agriculture, are attacked and criticized by ecological agrarians for their detrimental effects on environment created by specialization and the corporate form of ownership. To move agriculture toward the maintenance of ecological integrity, ecological agrarianism asserts that agribusiness corporations be reformed through: (1) supporting the small diversified farmers in projects like CSA; (2) changing agricultural education and policy, including farm subsidies, so as to curb agribusiness corporations. The impact of this ecological agrarianism has been great. It has offered a creative and promising vision for urbanites and environmental protection in agriculture.

Keywords

Agribusiness Corporations; Ecological Agriculture; Community-Supported Agriculture (Csa), Ecological Agrarianism; Lgu (Land-Grant Universities)

Introduction

Post-War era in America witnessed the rapid development of industrial agriculture, which was characterized by larger-sized farms and their dependence on ever-increasing and ever-more sophisticated technology in the service of increased productivity or the ideology of productionism. What developed concomitantly with this industrial agriculture were agribusiness corporations, which act as pure profit seekers, and neglect or pass on the environmental costs.

Industrial agriculture and agribusiness corporations, therefore, were both vehemently attacked by ecological agrarianism, which emerged in the latter half of the 20th century with the surge of the Sustainable Agriculture Movement and Environmental Movement. At once an inheritance and a reformulation of the long-cherished tradition of agrarianism in America, ecological agrarianism emphasizes the ecological contributions, instead of the political and economical contributions emphasized by the traditional rational agrarianism, that farmers and

farming could make to the well-being of the nation and of human beings in general, and concentrates on the protection and preservation of the health of the land and of the whole ecological system. It was out of this deep concern about the health and the sustainability of the land that ecological agrarianism launched its attack and criticism of industrial agriculture and agribusiness corporations, and proposed to reform the agribusiness corporations through various projects.

The Evils of Agribusiness Corporations

In the eyes of the ecological agrarians, industrial agriculture should be criticized and attacked not only for its destroying farming as a distinctive and valuable way of life, but for its huge environmental costs. To raise production, highly specialized and intensive monoculture is more and more dependent on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and machine power. The consumption of natural resources by this kind of agriculture is thus huge; it is more consumptive than productive. Both as a result and a cause of industrial agriculture, agribusiness corporations, which are substantially based on concentration and specialization, intensified the environmental harm done to the land and the whole ecological system.

First of all, due largely to specialization, agribusiness farms generate a series of increasingly complicated problems. Enormous fields of grain, for instance, are grown in one part of the country, and giant herds of livestock are raised in another. The result is that wheat and corn farmers must use chemical fertilizers, and cattle ranchers are faced with huge piles of manure to dispose of. The system of agribusiness corporations, in short, while allowing dramatic increases in productivity per man-hour and correspondingly cheap and abundant food, inevitably leads to soil compaction, top-soil erosion, loss of genetic diversity, pollution, and ultimately the loss of fertility [1]36-37,62.

More importantly, the corporate form of agribusiness

corporations also complicated the problems. Among those ecological critics of agribusiness corporations, Wendell Berry stands out prominently. Thoreau claims that “a corporation has no conscience; but a corporation of conscientious men is a corporation with a conscience” [2]387. Berry, however, contends that not only does a corporation not have a conscience, it discourages individuals from using their own consciences. In other words, the institutional structure of corporations, or the structural drawbacks inherent in the system of corporations, prevents individual consciences from influencing decisions. While distributing risks of ownership, after all, agribusiness corporations distribute also responsibilities, making it possible for modern American agriculture to preserve itself “within its grandiose and destructive assumptions by cutting itself off from the moral tradition”, which asks American people to consider that they are members of the human community and are therefore bound to help or harm it by their behavior [1]172.

For instance, Berry notes that in 1975 the Los Angeles Times reported that “some of our largest and most respected conservation organizations owned stock in the very corporations and industries that have been notorious for their destructiveness and their indifference to the concerns of conservationists” [1]17. Individuals in corporations are allowed to be insensitive to air pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, food safety, industrial and commercial waste, and they are more likely to justify their action or behavior by understanding their involvement in these as mere “practical compromise, a necessary reality, the price of modern comfort and convenience” [1]18. The corporate form of ownership in agribusiness corporations, therefore, makes it much easier for individuals to externalize certain environmental costs, which include problems of waste disposal, pollution control, and added burdens on public services. Absurdity is thus created: “It is not just possible, it is altogether to be expected, that our society would produce conservationists who invest in strip-mining companies, just as it must inevitably produce asthmatic executives whose industries pollute the air and vice-presidents of pesticide corporations whose children are dying of cancer” [1]18.

Headed by Berry, many ecological agrarians in America reached a consensus that either industrial agriculture or agribusiness corporations should be reformed. Recognizing the fact that few American families can return to the land as the primary center of

the family economy, although “few” might over time include several million families, ecological agrarians assert pragmatically that urban people should also take up the responsibility as a critical consumer, and play their role in rendering American agriculture an ecologically sustainable one, arguing that perhaps not everyone can farm, everyone, nevertheless, can and ought to practice ecological virtues. Therefore, urbanites should not only support small diversified farmers through CSAs, but launch reforms in American agriculture education and policies, so that the goal of an ecologically sound agriculture could be achieved.

Supporting Small Diversified Farms

Small diversified family farms, according to the ecological agrarians, are more likely and better motivated to sustain the health of the land, and therefore should be protected and supported. When diversified, farms wasted nothing, for farmers raise grain, feed it to livestock, and use the manure from the livestock to fertilize the field. Small owners of farms, moreover, are better motivated to care their land and maintain soil fertility, not only because their next generations would depend on the land for their survival, but also because long-term occupation of a place allows the owner to develop emotional attachments, a web of associations and memories that he or she will wish to preserve [3]88. Ecological agrarians, therefore, insist that small family farms should be preserved and protected, so that the fullest possible assurance could be given that forests and farmlands would be used by people who know them best and care the most about them [2] 49-50.

To this end, ecological agrarians propose many ways so as to aid and support the small and diversified farms in America. Among them, the most prominent one is the project named community-supported agriculture (CSA), a term coined by an American farmer, Jan Van der Tuin, who in turn had learned of it while living in Switzerland [5]25. In a typical CSA arrangement, a gathering of nonfarm families and individuals, regarding the CSA membership as a lifestyle choice, contracts with a farmer to produce vegetables, fruits, and other foods, and chooses to use only what is in season. Participating members share the costs of the arrangement, and sometimes contribute also labor as well as cash to the enterprise. Aiming to diminish the distance between the growers and consumers and depend more on direct local marketing of produce than on long-distance transport,

most memberships are located within 100 miles of a farm. By limiting transportation and perishability—two factors that constrain what crops can be grown for distant markets—CSAs are able to offer heirloom varieties that taste better, stay fresher longer, and don't have to be fumigated, irradiated, or refrigerated. Most importantly, almost always in these arrangements, farming methods use few or no inorganic fertilizers and pesticides. By guaranteeing a market, CSA projects provide farmers with reliable income and reduce attendant risks. They also provide an outlet for produce that is blemished or otherwise imperfect in appearance. Since its North American introduction in 1986, CSAs have spread rapidly throughout the United States. It has linked food buyers and food growers into a partnership, giving city dwellers a known source of wholesome food. Meanwhile, through their aids to many small, diverse farms across the country in their struggles with rising land values, expanding industrial organic farms, government aid for agribusiness, and increasing production costs, these CSAs have effectively promoted ecologically sound farm practices [5]17-27. In short, participants in CSAs are willing to support farmers who are dedicated to preserving health farmland, and to reward those growers who dare to be independent by giving them commitment to purchase from them, even if that means paying higher prices for food. In this regard, Wirzba's claim is quite representative: "Above all we need to get past the idea that cheaper food is better food, especially when we remember that the cheapness of food is made possible by the externalization of many ecological and cultural (especially health) costs, costs that we will end up paying in some other way" [6]15.

As lines between city and countryside continue to blur, many urban agrarians even propose to develop urban farms, or urban agriculture, what some refer to as the "quiet revolution" in food production [6]16. For people living in the outskirts of cities, Gene Logsdon suggests small owner-operated farms of twenty acres or so, supported by off-farm work. And John Todd has proposed square city blocks under glass that function as farms and wastewater treatment systems [7]97. The Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley, California, for example, is developing gardens in public schools throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. Near the Adam Joseph Lewis Center for Environmental Studies designed and developed by Oberlin College, a seventy-acre farm site was built in the mid-1990s as a home for community-supported farm, which grow

food for the college and community while providing a site for public education. Recently, with the support of a foundation, a school parking lot was converted into a large garden, providing food for the school cafeteria and yielding a surplus to sell to local restaurants. As planned, much of the work was done by young students [7]105-107. This urban agriculture is demonstrating that food can be grown in numerous urban settings, including backyards, on rooftops, in window boxes and basements, on vacant lots, greenbelts, or playgrounds, and in public housing projects.

Reforming Agricultural Education and Policies

American agricultural education and policies, however, as it is correctly perceived by the ecological agrarians, are based on "the principle of 'full production'" and embedded with the "exploitative mentality". Totally abandoning their interest in the health of the land, the agricultural experts and policy makers regard agriculture as purely a commercial enterprise. The sole purpose of agriculture, for them, is to provide as much food as quickly and cheaply; that all this is paid for not just with labor, money, and fuel, but with land is completely out of their concern. In this regard, agrarians argue that land-grant universities (LGUs) in the nation are indictable for becoming adjuncts to agribusiness. The origin of the LGU, with the Morrill Act (1862) as its enabling legislation, was a gift, from the federal government to each of the states of the U.S., of federal land for the establishment of a public college. In essence, it is to provide agricultural "education for democracy" [8]282-285. Roughly from the 1920s to the 1990s, LGUs in America contributed in significant ways to the industrialization of agriculture [9]. In Berry's view, LGUs found themselves basically in the service of the industrial establishment, and captured by the ideology of scientism, the worship of things scientific. Berry wrote:

The tragedy of the land-grant acts is that their moral imperative came finally to have nowhere to rest except on the careers of the specialists whose standards and operating procedures were amoral: the "objective" practitioners of the "science" of agriculture, whose minds have no direction other than that laid out by career necessity and the logic of experimentation. They have no apparent moral allegiances or bearings or limits. Their work thus inevitably serves whatever power is greatest. That

power at present is in the industrial economy, of which “agribusiness” is a part. [1]155-156.

To make matters worse, most of American government subsidy payments are channeled to operators of large industrial farms. Government commodity programs, for instance, are paid out on the basis of amount grown, and the program of soil bank, on the basis of amount of land in retire. In this case, small-scale farmers always lost. In addition, many farmers who were on the margins of successful operation could not afford to retain their property and farming rights. Even with limits that eventually capped payment levels, larger-scale growers always gained bigger federal checks. Bigger but fewer farms remained [10]46, [11]61-61, 134. Two-thirds of the farm subsidy payments (\$100 billion over a ten-year period) earmarked by the 2002 farm bill, for instance, went to just 10 percent of the largest farming enterprises [12]160. Consequently, as remarked by some agricultural exports, commodity programs have actually become “corporate welfare”, which provide capital and security, allowing farms to leverage equity to purchase machinery and to buy out their neighbors and consolidate holdings [13]17. As food production concentrates, after all, government farm programs have become less concerned with the modest-sized family farms and more concerned with absorbing the risk assumed by the largest farms that produce so much of the food that feeds Americans and plays a vital role in international trade [14]x. This further reduces farm numbers and increases farm size, adding more pressure on the environment.

The detrimental effects of government subsidies on environment have been serious. Subsidies encouraged overproduction at the cost of environmental quality. In other words, many of the government interventions had negative effects for the environment because of increased agricultural output due to subsidies. As concluded by Hosemann, in America,

The present farm program and other risk-reducing programs such as federally subsidized crop insurance, which transfers billions of taxpayer monies to large farm operations, is , in many instances, at cross purposes with the environment because crops are planted on acres that would likely be in timber or pasture. But with the high level of federal subsidies to agriculture over the years, there has been an increasing level of

inefficient and counterproductive environmental regulations”. [15]188-189

Indeed, in the process of short-term policy actions and reactions, agriculture subsidies have produced a permanently altered farm structure that has produced cheaper food and released human resources to other productive activities.

Apparently, American agricultural education and policies are harmful for the environment and need to be reformed. This could not hope to be completed by the small farmers, whose number and political power are diminishing. In this context, agrarians demand that urban Americans be armed with ecological virtues: “perhaps not everyone can farm; everyone, nevertheless, can and ought to practice these virtues” [8]290, and that all urbanites become critical and responsible consumers, so that the political powers of these corporations can be effectively curbed. As argued by Berry, the environmental problems in industrial agriculture is not only with the corporations, but with all American urban consumers, for corporations are exactly what they allowed them to become. Precisely because consumers have become the “pawns of agribusiness thinking”, Corporations can engage in practices destructive to the environment and the ecosystem. Their power, so to speak, can be traced back to the decision of ordinary consumers [1]24. To solve the problem, a fundamental change of perceptions need to take place in the mentality of urban people.

Ecological agrarians also assert that agriculture educators and experts need to be guided by new principles of ecological integrity. Some focus on curriculum change or adaptation, claiming that courses like sustainable agriculture, ecological engineering, wastewater management, and land management need to be added or enhanced [7]103-107. Some others advocate reform in agricultural research, asserting that agricultural scientists need to abandon their previous preoccupation in “productivity” and reorient their research in the laboratory, so as to reduce or diminish the environmental threats agriculture has brought forth [8]295-296. Still others, wisely recognizing that for years (continuing to this day) most applied ethicists either ignored agriculture or casually identified agriculture as a contributor among many to the environmental problems environmental ethicists sought to analyze, and that agriculture was not a matter of separate, or unique,

focus for scholarly ethical research or teaching, propose that professional philosophers be recruited in colleges of agriculture, so that they could devote to agriculture ethics, helping agricultural scientists and educators in their rethinking of agriculture [8]297. In short, these agrarians all agree that to create a vision of ecological agriculture, “colleges and universities might pioneer the work necessary to create a compelling vision of an ecologically sustainable, spiritually sustaining world”, and that without such a vision, all will perish [7]106-107.

Last but not least, ecological agrarians claim that change in the field of legislation is extremely crucial. As mentioned before, American agricultural policies, including farm subsidy programs, have been detrimental on the environment.

Agrarians insist, therefore, that a legislative body guided by ecological virtues should be formulated, so that government subsidy or public support for agriculture can depend on environmental stewardship. In other words, policies are justified only if they actually support this culture of stewardship [3]206. To achieve this, urban consumers should encourage the U.S. government to stop its “financial support of megafarms and the corporate interests they support” [6]15. Quite similarly, Montmarquet observes in his book that:

[T]he carrot of government assistance must be coupled with the stick of much stricter curbs on existing ecologically unsound agricultural practices. This would hasten the departure from agriculture of those who, for whatever reason, are unable to farm in a socially responsible fashion, thereby increasing the opportunities for those who can and will farm in this way. Such curbs, properly enforced, will help to ensure that today's young idealists brought into agriculture with public assistance do not become tomorrow's ecological reprobates. [16]246

With urban people's awareness of the importance of ecologically sustainable agriculture raised, it is reasonable to anticipate that such legislative body would produce far different laws from those now in effect.

The Influence Of Ecological Agrarianism

Ecological agrarianism has exerted great impact on the landscape of American agriculture. More and more advocates for CSA, for example, now agree that food is

the most direct link between culture and nature, city and farm folk; that “there is no reason why consumers and institutions (schools and hospitals, for instance) cannot buy more from local producers, and thus cut down on many costs.... Consumers, in turn, can benefit producers by giving to them their recyclable waste and their steady business” [6]15-16. Meanwhile, fundamental shift has occurred in the field of education and policy making. In modern land-grant universities, some subtle but important “wind changes”, like an increasing interest in agricultural sustainability or alternative agricultural techniques and technologies, an attempt at the “humanization” of the research and instructional agenda of agricultural colleges, especially in the form of courses, symposia, workshops, etc., have taken place, representing “a potentially profound shift from a half-century trend toward the land-grant university's being the handmaiden of positivistic science and large-scale agribusiness” [8]279-281.

On the legal and legislative front, also, various organizations fighting against industrial agriculture came into being. The Sierra Club, for instance, as an urban and suburban organization which recently focuses a great deal of attention on intertwined agricultural and environmental issues such as Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFOs) and clean water, campaigned against industrial meat production [17]222-236. Berry's conception of an ecologically sound agriculture has provided policy makers and the general public a holistic way to think about the competing values—economic, social, environmental, and cultural—that the nation's agriculture must serve, and a way to conceptualize farming that honors those values. Evidences show that ecological agrarian ideas are starting to infiltrate agroecological policy debate. Groups like ACRES USA, the National Family Farm Coalition, and the Center for Rural Affairs have echoed these agrarians in proclaiming environmental stewardship as a central value of agriculture policy. More mainstream voices have also begun to adopt this sort of language. Dan Glickman, secretary of agriculture under President Clinton, stated in 2000 that he expects conservation rather than crop production issues to become “the driving intellectual force” behind farm programs. In the following spring, Senator Harkin introduced the Conservation Security Act, which proposed to extend earlier conservation efforts by paying farmers directly for their stewardship. In introducing the bill, Harkin

characterized farmers and ranchers as not only producers but also stewards of the nations' natural resources [3]211-212. This is to suggest that in America, as long as there are ecological agrarians who articulate their vision of an alliance between the rural and the city, the prospects for bringing sustainable agriculture on the rise will remain in place.

Perhaps more importantly, ecological agrarianism has made the marriage of urban-industrial and rural-agrarian perspectives possible through the subversion of the dualism between rural and urban. Wirzba contends that ecological agrarians' concern "cannot simply be about the preservation of farmland, but must include the care of all living spaces—residential neighborhoods, schools and playgrounds, parks, and landfills, as well as glaciers, forests, wetlands, and oceans—the protection of all the places that maintain life" [6]6. Similarly, Orr advocates that agriculture should be put back into an urban fabric, so that buildings and communities could be primarily powered by sunlight, as in traditional agrarian communities, and through the combination of better design and frugality, business and entire communities that produce no waste could be developed, as with well-operated traditional farms. In sum, like rural people generally, citizens must become ecologically competent enough to meet many of their needs with local resources. Inspired by this idea, a "green building coalition" came into being, joined by architects, engineers, developers, county planners, public officials, and nonprofit groups that aim to change the face of the region. In Cleveland, projects under way now include an effort by EcoCity Cleveland to build an environmentally designed community; ecological redesign of a bank building in a transitional neighborhood; the makeover of a brewery aiming to become a zero-discharge company; and ecological restoration of the Cuyahoga River valley [7]105-107.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up in Wirzba's words: "Agrarianism matters—even to urbanites" [6]1. Directed by a practical orientation and sharing unintentionally John Dewey's pragmatism, urban agrarianism has collapsed the harmful dualism between rural and urban, nature and culture, and developed a synthetic and bolder vision for urbanites to participate and cooperate with the rural residents in promoting the

health of land and culture together. To this end, ecological agrarians insist that urbanites should also possess the ecological virtues of those small diversified farmers, and play their part in the scheme of sustainable or ecological agriculture. Specifically, they could support the small diversified farmers through participating in projects like CSA, so as to promote ecologically sound farm practices. They could also make endeavors to reform American agriculture education and research in agriculture colleges and universities, and change agriculture policies, including farm subsidies, so as to curb agribusiness corporations and move American agriculture toward the direction of an ecologically sustainable one. The impact of this urban agrarianism, as manifested, has been great. It has even made the marriage of urban-industrial and rural-agrarian perspectives possible.

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